

An Interview with  
Governor Paul B. Johnson, Jr.  
addresses the graduating class of the Mississippi Highway Patrol  
August 31, 1964

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY  
Post Office Box 571  
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

AU 095

TR 008

Speaker: Johnson, Paul B. Jr.

Title: Governor Paul B. Johnson, Jr. addresses the graduating class of the Mississippi Highway Patrol, August 31, 1964

Scope Note: This recording was selected to be digitally remastered through the National Endowment for the Humanities Civil Rights Era Recordings Grant in 2004.

## AU 095

JOHNSON:

Thank you very much, General Birdsong, Chief Morgan, [all of our] good friends...and I do feel that every member of this patrol is my friend for I am theirs. I'm delighted, perhaps more than anyone else, to see this fine group of young men who have taken this course and who have qualified and are now fixing to go to work for the highway patrol. In these turbulent and unsure and sometimes unsafe times, we are faced with a great many problems that people used to never even dream about. Things are changing and changing fast. And because of these changes, a great many people in this country believe honestly deep in their heart that it is open season upon policemen of any type. Like I told some of them the other day, I think I'll vote for Tarzan. He's not afraid of the natives. But in these times I know that among this fine bunch of young men that I'm looking probably in the face of some dead men. It's not a happy thought, and, perhaps, it will not come about, and a great deal of it is going to depend upon you. You can go ahead and take chances if you want to. You can overlook the school solution and the training that you've had if you want to, but you're going to have to be just as alert as you have ever been in all your life. I want to tell the entire assembly...the older men of the patrol already know this...I do not call upon you to take a chance. You owe it to no one on earth to take a chance. If you do in the present time, you're going to come out at the little end of the horn. I know that the fact that you are young men that, to a great extent, that you will be reckless. I pray God that you've gotten a lot of that recklessness out of your system. I want you to know that in asking you not to take a chance that I stand ready at all times to back you up and to support your position provided that you are right. And if you have to kill a man, you can be certain that if it is done under the circumstances which are self defense that you'll have a pardon from the state penitentiary before you get there from me. I am not going to stand back and see any of the highway patrolmen beaten up or have to subject themselves to the degradation the police in New York and Rochester and Philadelphia and some of these other places have been subjected to. And there's not going to be any of this brick-throwing and striking people over the heads with garbage cans and all that sort of stuff. When you are called upon to put down a situation, we expect it to be put down and put down quickly before it has a chance to get out of hand. I told the National Guard Association in speaking to them Saturday that I did not plan to call upon them at any time during these next three and a half years. That the state police in Mississippi, according to the statement of J. Edgar Hoover in New York on nationwide television, was to the effect that Governor Johnson and his state highway patrol is one the [crack] police outfits of America. That came from a man who has been in the business longer than anyone else, and it made a lump come up in my throat to know that such a man looks upon this organization as he does. Perhaps this is not true for some of the people who work for him, but I'd like to say to you that

the Civil Rights Law was passed by the National Congress and is a federal statute, and neither you nor I have any obligation to enforce the Civil Rights Law. In addition to this, I'd like for you to remember that the patrol's business most of the time is not everybody else's business. You can go ahead and be a big mouth, do a lot of talking and get your comrades in serious trouble. Sometimes one whack will spoil a barrel of milk. And one highway patrolman getting into serious trouble with a lot of publicity attended thereon can, to a great extent, damage the reputation of this fine group of men. I want to ask you that, when you go to these towns where you have been assigned, that you stay out of the organizations. It's a very difficult thing for you to start off in your patrol work and to join all the civic organizations and all the various organizations in the community, because you will find in these various towns that there are political clicks or rings or whatever you want to call them. Factions. And if you get to fooling with one of them pretty soon the other group's going to be after your job. The best way for you to get along is to attend to your own business, that is, of doing the work that you're assigned to do. Some of the older men who belong to the various civic clubs and who participate in little league baseball and things of that sort now learn to adapt themselves to their work in such a fashion that it does give them some time for these worthwhile efforts that is fine public relations for the state police. If you are accosted by a member of the FBI and he wants to talk with you or question you about anything pertaining to civil rights or pertaining to instances of arrest or anything of that type, your answer...and I'd like for you to remember this...your answer is "I have no comment and I refer you to General Birdsong or to Chief Morgan." On these matters, such as robberies of banks, things of that type, we want to give them all the help we can possible give them. All heinous crimes, we want to bend every effort. We have worked hard in the first part of this year, because I believed in the members of the highway patrol. I've seen some of them crucified through the years by members of the legislature. The legislature this time has authorized a fine law enforcement training academy with a crime laboratory. This is for the purpose of training all law enforcement officers in the state of Mississippi. Constables, game wardens, motor vehicle personnel and many others. This is going to be one of the finest academies there is in the country. Those in charge are going to visit other academies over the United States and see where they've made their mistakes and take advantage of them, and we're going to have one of the finest in America. For this reason, I find all over the state of Mississippi everywhere I go in talking to constables and deputy sheriffs and sheriffs that these men who are constables and sheriffs and deputies are just as anxious as they can be to upgrade their ability as a law enforcement officer knowing that, if they upgrade their abilities, that it puts them in a position to be in great demand by the people in their home areas. This is important, and it may not be too long before some of you will be up here instructing in schools of this type or, perhaps, helping in the work of this academy. It is my purpose to try to

see to it as best I can that the men who have been strong, faithful and loyal employees of the state of Mississippi with the state police, that these older men who are not able to wrestle drunks up and down these highways, that in their last days on the patrol that they have an opportunity to go into some position with the patrol that is better in salary and is easier insofar as physical exposure is concerned. I am anxious...and so is General Birdsong and so is Chief Morgan...to see this the finest organization in the world. It can easily be that if you want it to be such. I want you to know that I'm proud of every man in this class. Just as proud of you as I am the older men on this patrol. All of you, I assume, will be working under one of these old men. When I say old men, I'm talking about the folks younger than I am. But you'll be working with them. I'd like for you to give heed to what they tell you. They've been down the road. They know the ropes, and they're not going to tell you wrong. I believe that. Nor do I believe that they will try to get you in any type of trouble at any time. I want you to remember that the sheriff in each county in this state is the chief law enforcement officer, and the chief of police is the chief law enforcement officer in the cities. We do not want to attend to their affairs. We want to work with them and cooperate with them. But you are not to get out and do their job for them. This is the reason we passed legislation at this regular session in January making it possible for the supervisors to hire additional help for the sheriffs of the counties so that they will not have to constantly call upon the highway patrolmen to help them go arrest a [Negro] or undertake some hazardous job. If we do the work on the highways of this state, then we've done one more terrific job. We've got all we can handle out there. There is a challenge in this group, a challenge in that this patrol is going to be an escape from the ordinary. We're going to be the best police force in America. You've been selected as men who are intelligent, as men who are patriotic, and as men who love your state. I have nothing whatsoever against the Ku Klux Klan, but if you are a member of the Ku Klux Klan now or if you plan to join, the best thing for you to do is to get your hat and leave for you cannot take [inaudible] of the state police of Mississippi and not have the showdown to come when there is a conflict arose. That is true of any other organization in this state that sees fit at any time to try to take the law enforcement into their own hands. I'm trying to be as honest with you as I know how, because we've had governors to try to run the highway patrol before, and it don't work. And two cooks are going to spoil the broth. Regardless of what anyone may say in the past, now or in the future, the man who is running the highway patrol is General T. B. Birdsong. His second in command is Chief D. Morgan. Their word is final. If you are caught drinking in uniform or getting drunk in uniform or conducting yourself in any manner that is going to reflect upon the other members of the highway patrol and you're called in and you're given your papers, I ask you as a personal favor to keep moving until you get back home and don't detour by the governor's office. I know that that sounds a little odd. I know that because political influence has worked in the past that there are people

on this patrol that believe it'll work again. And I want to challenge you that, if you believe it will, then you just try it. I got off the airplane down there at the governor's meeting in New Orleans the other day. The first thing the state trooper, lieutenant, there in Louisiana said to me, the same thing in Tennessee, was "Governor Johnson, I've been wanting to meet you, because I understand that you have never fixed a ticket since you've been in the governor's office." And, if you arrest a man, you can be certain that Paul Johnson is not going to fix the ticket. I had a millionaire to walk into the office about four weeks ago asking me to fix a speeding ticket for him. I told him I wouldn't do it, but, if he'd leave it on the desk, I'd pay it for him. And he was so embarrassed that he said, "Well, I didn't come here to talk about that anyway, Governor. I'll pay for it myself." But if I start fixing these tickets, you'll stop giving tickets when you feel that they should be given. Another thing I want to caution you. The people of Mississippi have entrusted into my hands and into your hands and into General Birdsong and the Chief's hands, authority that the patrol has never had before. If you abuse that authority, you've got a good chance of losing it. Under the proclamation that should be issued for emergencies, I have not yet had to issue one nor have we had to commit the state police. Our strategy in Mississippi is to let the local law enforcement officers handle it. We help them any way that we can on advising with them, going in ahead of time and investigating, but holding back in reserve the members of the state police to help them and to back them up. We do this, because I do not want to get in a position of the state being in open defiance with the federal government. I'd like for you to remember that. Another thing I'd like to point out to you is that, in the past, a lot of people have gone to the local colonels and to the legislators that are their friends seeking help. If you do your job and do a good job, you're not going to need any help at all. Let me say there's a time of laying that groundwork, because regardless of who it is, if you're fired from the highway patrol and no man in this room is a cinch to stay on the state police if he does these things that I have been speaking about. I've talked with General Birdsong about it. We've been lax in the past. We've had some drinking in uniform. We've had some hauling of whiskey in the backs of patrol cars. Things of that type. But I plead with you, gentlemen, that, this time, these three and a half years that you obviate that sort of a thing. Another thing that I'd like to point out to you is that you're working with good men. That pettiness, these little petty jealousies, are not worth a thing on earth except to get someone fired. You're working with a man, you want to believe in him. You want him to have confidence in you that you'll never let him down. You're facing some things that no one has ever faced before, and these are going to be three and a half of the toughest years that the people in this state has ever seen. We have got to cut down on the accident toll in the state of Mississippi. We need more patrolmen, more moving about. If you're going to drink your coffee, take a thermos jug with you. Don't hang around these places that have got a bad reputation. If you do, you're hunting trouble. As long as you do your job,

you're going to be backed up. I ask you not to be ticket happy. The people of this state, because of the beefing up of the state police, are somewhat concerned that now everybody in the state is going to be getting these tickets real fast. Be careful. Be sure. You don't have to make a record by seeing how many tickets you can give. But, when people deserve it, I ask that you give them. You'll be backed up by me and by the heads of this organization. As I said, pettiness is not going to help anybody, but it can hurt the entire patrol. I'm delighted to be here and to say these few things to you here this morning. We're trying to get you the best equipment that you could possibly have. We're trying to see to it that you're treated right. The state police, to some extent, has been made a goat of in the past. They're not going to be made a goat of at any time in the three and a half years that I'm in office if we can help it. I ask you to do your job, attend to your business, let the other man attend to his. Be courteous and firm. You'll gain the respect of everyone in Mississippi. If you're neat in your dress, it'll make a real impression on people. For the first time in my lifetime, the highway patrol in this state is respected as it has never been respected before, and the people, now, in this state, from the top to the bottom, know that you mean business. From time to time, you will receive orders. Some of them are going to come pretty quick. We've got some visitors in our state that are not the type that have come here for outdoor camping purposes. We expect to see that they are checked, not once, but twelve and fifteen times a day. Their position should be a position that is uncomfortable. Bad breaks, bad windshield wipers, running through stop signs, topping the hills on the wrong side of the road. This is a time when people have got to use their ingenuity, their resourcefulness and their ability. And Hades is not hot compared to what we want it to be for some of these people who are in here for no purpose except to cause trouble. I'm delighted to be here. Every man on this patrol has my respect and my devotion. And I ask you, if you do nothing else, to keep it that way. When you are in Jackson, if there is something that can be done for you back home, the people for you to come through are your superiors. I'm an ex officio. I'm an honorary here. The two active heads are sitting behind me, and their word will be the law insofar as I'm concerned. And I expect to back them up like they've never been backed up before and to hold them responsible as they have never been held responsible before. This is a difficult time in which we live. It's a difficult time in every part of this country. We can't help people starting things, but we can be this first group to shut it off like you would a water hydrant. And we propose to do exactly that. So I ask you to be loyal to each other, to stick with each other, because you're going to need your partner that your working with and others on this patrol as you have never worked...needed them before. I believe in this patrol, and so does my family. So does the members of the legislature. I ask you to be alert at all times. Anything that you see that you feel ought to be reported, you want to get it to your identification crowd through the proper channels or to the head of the patrol or to the chief. Be alert in your communities and know

what's going on. And the best way on earth to know what's going on is to listen and not to talk. Thank you very much. It's an honor for me to be among such fine men and a lovely woman back there. Thank you.

**END OF RECORDING**